

WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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HELENA STEPHENS OF WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION

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SAUL 00:00:12

Alright. First of all, what race or ethnicity do you identify yourself with?

HELENA 00:00:23

African American.

SAUL 00:00:27

Awesome, perfect. And what about gender or sex?

HELENA 00:00:34

I identify with she/her pronouns.

SAUL 00:00:39

Awesome. Okay, so what was your life story prior to joining the Rainbow Coalition? Where were you born? Or did you grow up in Washington State? Or if you didn't, did you move here? If so, why?

HELENA 00:00:52

I was born in Chicago, Illinois, and was raised primarily by my father and then my grandmother. My father was a [Democratic Party] precinct captain, which we now call--oh, well, we call them precinct something, I forget what we call them now-- and a precinct captain was very involved in his neighborhood. He knew all of his community, and he helped get people out to vote on Election Day, and in those days, on election day, people were let allowed to take the day off, so that they would have no reason not to vote. And my father would go around and pick up elderly people and people with limited access to get them to the polls. So I was raised around politics and actually got to see my father at work a lot as a child.

When I got to be a teenager, I moved to California and went to high school in my first years of college in California, got married in California and moved to Minneapolis, and then by Minneapolis moved to Seattle after Minneapolis. So my former husband at the time was very much involved in local politics. He was a precinct officer, and I would go to legislative district meetings with him, and sometimes I would get involved in projects, and sometimes I didn't. And then as time progressed, I got very much involved in the Kennedy campaign, that's Ted Kennedy, not Robert F. Kennedy. So Ted Kennedy campaign, and actually became a national delegate for Ted Kennedy. And that was in the 1980's.

And in 1984 I really didn't do a whole lot of politics, and Jesse Jackson was in the race and in 1984. But in 1987, I got very much involved and became a delegate for Jackson, and ended up being a national delegate for Jackson. So I got very much involved with the Rainbow in 1987, 1988. And after that [Democratic] National Convention, which was impressive by the Jackson people, there were so many goals that we surpassed and met and made the country really take notice, that people of color and people with limited access could make a political impact.

So one of the things the Jesse Jackson campaign did, as you probably well know, is register seven million new voters during that campaign, which was so impressive, and we brought everybody to the table. So it truly was a rainbow of colors. You know, every stripe was represented in some way, from brown, to yellow, to red, to black, to white, to LGBTQI, people with limited access. So every stripe of the rainbow was present. And that really left an impression on me, because it really said that this country wasn't for just to select white people, and especially white males, that this country and the political process could be accessible and was for everyone, and for everyone to be able to make decisions on the political process. And that enthused me throughout. And that's why I wanted to be involved, that's why I got involved.

And I didn't think that there was anything better than being with my people, that's how I felt. And in fact, I have a picture of the Washington State Rainbow that was probably taken in 1988 or 1989, and I think we're in Yakima, or--yeah, I think we're in Yakima. And it's probably about forty or fifty of us in this picture, you know. And I hadn't seen it in decades, and a friend of mine sent it to me, someone you're probably going to talk to, Bob Barnes, he sent it to me, and it brought tears to my eyes, because in my mind I thought, "There's my tribe, there's my people." So I was just really, really--I was really moved by the fact that there's a group of people on this earth that I identify with and that I connect with and I have solidarity with, and that was really represented in the Rainbow Coalition.

So that was a long story to answer your question, but that's how I got here. That's how we got to the Rainbow.

SAUL 00:06:30

Awesome. Were you involved--well, you mentioned a little bit about your involvement in electoral politics prior to '87. What in particular motivated you to the national campaign? And then how did you end up in the Washington State?

HELENA 00:06:54

Yeah well, I have a habit that once I lock onto a project, I tend to take it on tooth and nail. So when we talk about the Kennedy campaign, for example, first I started off in a very small position, which was just organizing the 11th District Democrats for Kennedy. And then I got really, really good at it. I did trainings, I did all kinds of things, and they asked me to organize the 32nd, either the 32nd or the 36th district as well. So I was doing two districts at once, and I got really, really good at it, and they said, "Hey, would you go to Arizona and organize Kennedy people for us down in Arizona?" And I did that, and it was great, was a great experience.

And then they asked me if I would go to California. And at that time I was getting my college degree, and I had a choice of either getting my college degree or going to California for Kennedy, and I wanted my college degree. So I told him, "Nope, I'm not going to go to California. Getting that college degree is more important." And then they asked if I had an interest in becoming a national delegate, and I did that. I ran for national delegate, and I came in as the first delegate selected, so that was pretty cool.

And out of that, in those days, when you became a Kennedy delegate, Ted Kennedy would call you personally and have a conversation with you personally. So I got the chance to sit down and talk with Ted Kennedy, and he had all kinds of background information on me, he knew all about me, he knew I had a child and who I was married to and all those kind of things. And I felt very seen, you know, because here he was a US Senator, you know, and he was taking the time to have a phone conversation with me. And when he came out here for a campaign thing, I was supposed to meet with him one on one, but I had a conflict with work, and I couldn't get there, so that really disappointed me. But having the conversation with him on the phone is a memory that I will have all my life. And you know, probably to him, it wasn't that much, but the fact that I got to sit down with a US senator and have a one on one conversation and talk to him about campaign strategy and what he should do and what I thought the community was thinking, great, great honor, right?

So I knew what it was like to be a national delegate. So in 1988, when I ran for national delegate for Jackson, I kind of knew all the ins and outs of what to expect, and I wasn't like a deer in the headlights. I really had a little bit of experience, not a lot, but a little bit of experience. And so I could really focus on strategy, on what to do, because I wasn't distracted by all the things they give you when you're a national delegate.

It's a big process, and if you haven't ever been a national delegate, I encourage you to be one. Because one, not only do you get elected, I didn't have any money, you know, we really didn't have the money to send me to Atlanta, and so I had to fundraise. And people just fundraised and gave me money, and, you know, made sure I had enough money to go and have a good time. And that's the kind of delegate that you want. You want to delegate who isn't so rich that they can pick up the tab themselves. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, I'm just saying you really do want people who can't afford to be in the process to be part of the process, you know? And so that means the community needs to chip in and help those folks get to be a national delegate. I've been a national delegate twice. I probably would not be a national delegate again, but I certainly would help somebody else if I thought that they were worthy to be able to go. [pauses]

Did I answer your question?

SAUL 00:06:55

Yes, and then also your involvement with the Washington State Rainbow Coalition. How did you go from national to the Rainbow?

HELENA 00:11:48

Because of the connections, I got to know Larry Gossett pretty well. Larry was the chair of the Washington State Rainbow Coalition, and he asked me to come on board as secretary, you have to get elected in. But by that time, a lot of people in the Rainbow Coalition knew me and knew that I was pretty good at connecting, so they elected me in as secretary. I'd been a secretary in a lot of other organizations as well, so it wasn't a very hard position for me, and so we traveled all over the state.

That was another wonderful experience that doesn't happen anymore. Because it was the Washington State Rainbow Coalition, each chapter would host the state meeting every two months. And so we would get up like at like, if it was in Yakima or Spokane, I remember getting up at like, four, five in the morning and getting in the car with maybe four or five other people from Seattle. And there we would drive all the way over to Yakima, or we would drive all the way to Spokane. Usually, if we went to Spokane, we stayed the night at somebody's house. Yakima, not so much. It doesn't take that long to get back home, you just get back home late. But it was wonderful because we went to Native American reservations. We went up to Bellingham. I already mentioned Spokane and Yakima. We went to Centralia. We went all over the state, because the meetings were only held once or twice a year in Seattle. So it was wonderful because I got to meet people from all over who were passionate about politics and passionate about the Rainbow and what the Rainbow could offer.

SAUL 00:13:57

And so what year was it that you joined the Rainbow Coalition, and what also were the activities? Could you expand more on the activities that they were doing around the time that you joined, or that maybe influenced your decision to becoming secretary?

HELENA 00:14:14

Well, I also worked closely with Charles Rolland, who was the state campaign manager for Jesse Jackson in 1987, 1988. And I can't tell you exactly when I joined the Rainbow Coalition, because it kind of morphed into it, so I'm going to say '87, '88 for sure.

And type of activities, besides going around to all different types of communities around the state to hear what their concerns were, and support strike efforts like I remember there was the immigrant workers strike against grape farmers that went on for a long time. We were supportive of that. We also influenced state legislature politics. Jesse Wineberry was a state representative, and we wanted him to be, I think, Minority Whip. And this was the first time an outside organization influenced inside legislature politics. We did those kind of things.

We worked very hard on what kind of charter we wanted. We worked very hard to make sure that we were including everybody from every stripe. And that wasn't always easy, because people came to the table with their own positions about what the Rainbow should look like, and it was very hard for them to get inclusivity as part of how we operated.

So let's see, what else did we do? We attended all kinds of community events. We made our presence known. We held conventions, we held our own state convention. We also went to Democratic Party conventions around the state and said, "Hey, this is the Rainbow, and this is what we're doing." So we also talked to the Green Party

a lot and invited their candidates to come in and talk to us, so we got a sense of what was going on with Green politics. So we did a lot of that.

I think the only entity that we never really reached out to was the Republican Party. We never felt that the Republican Party was inclusive, so we just didn't spend our energies in that. And I think that makes sense, because even to this day, I wouldn't spend our energies. If the Rainbows were still around. I wouldn't spend our energies trying to go after the Republican Party. Even here, the Republican Party is probably more liberal than other state Republican parties, but still, the fact that they would even consider supporting someone like Trump for office is not the type of people we're interested in.

SAUL 00:17:23

Yeah. And can you talk a little bit more about how your specific position as secretary worked? Like, what did your day to day look like? And yeah.

HELENA 00:17:36

Well, my job was to not only keep the minutes of the meetings, but my job was also to contact all of the members, making sure that they knew when meetings were going to occur, where they were going to occur, the logistics of it. I also served to kind of advise Larry and the other elected officials on positions they should take. I was always inside the small executive meetings we had. We had an attorney, Mary Alice Theiler was our attorney, and so a lot of times we would have to meet with her to make sure that what we were doing was legal and not violating any of our bylaws or violating any state laws. And let's see, what else did I do? [pauses] I'd say that's probably it, you know, that was a lot. Oh, and I worked with the treasurer closely to make sure that we were doing things legally, and we were good at that.

SAUL 00:19:02

And also just how long were you involved as secretary? And also just in the Washington State Rainbow?

HELENA 00:19:13

I was involved with the Washington State Rainbow until it fizzled out, until it was no longer existent, and for a while, as the Rainbow, the state Rainbow, was fizzling out, the King County Rainbow and the Bellingham chapter Rainbow were still very much in existence and very active. So I stayed involved with the King County Rainbow until it stopped meeting, and the Bellingham rainbow still meets. They still get together on a regular basis. And that's Hue Beattie is in charge of the Bellingham one. And even though he's up in age now, I see notes from him where the Bellingham chapter--I should say alumni--still get together. So very much involved in working with Jesse Jackson when I was with the state Rainbow, whatever had to do with when Jesse came to town, I was always somehow part of the support system that helped make that happen. So a lot of those things, any events we put on, those kind of things.

SAUL 00:20:43

Nice, could you talk a little bit about how the Washington State Rainbow Coalition was structured, how decisions were made, how were new members recruited, and how were new chapters formed?

HELENA 00:20:58

Okay, well, first to talk about it. So we had a chair, a vice chair, treasurer, secretary, and an attorney who also served as the parliamentarian. That consisted of the executive committee, and then each of the chairs of the state chapter was part of this inner circle as well. So state chairs were part of the decisions we were made. There was a few times we voted on an issue, but a lot of times it was more of consensus than voting, making a decision, but if it came to a point that we couldn't get to consensus then we would take a vote. And I already said that we

met every two months, we met in a different area on the state, so that was the structure. And then you asked me something else...

SAUL 00:22:07

How were new members recruited and new chapters formed?

HELENA 00:22:15

You know, we didn't have to spend a whole lot of time trying to recruit new members. People heard a lot about the Rainbow, so they just came to a meeting. We would just say, "hey, we meet at..." At that time, we met at CAMP. CAMP, it was for the Central Area Motivation Program. They call it something else now, but it was this old firehouse off of 18th [Avenue] and Yesler [Way]? No, maybe a little further north, but I know it was on 18th, maybe past Cherry [Street]. So we used to meet there on a regular basis. People were always invited to come in. There was no had to be screening first, or anything like that.

And as far as new chapters were formed, people just really kind of almost--I don't want to say, magically, that's not the right word, there is a word for it. But they would just come to a meeting, and if the chapter got large enough, then they would contact us as the state chapter and said, "We want to have a chapter in this state, in this part of the state, this is how many people we have." And usually they had thirty to forty people who would want to, you know... And I think then they were responsible for putting a charter together, you know, and making an application to the state and getting us to approve their charter. And then that means that we would go up to that place and have a conversation with the people and find out if they really were interested in doing this, and did they hold the same ideals that we did?

I remember going up to Bellingham, there was a woman by the name of Imogene Bowen, Native American woman who was very much engaged in Rainbow politics, and another woman by the name of Margie--I'm forgetting Margie's last name, I'm sorry. It'll come to me as soon as we finish. Anyway, so Margie and Imogene and Hue were very instrumental in saying, you know, "We have a strong group of people up here in Bellingham. We want a chapter."

So I don't want to come across like we were loosey-goosey. We did have some structure to us. But if you remember what I said, that this is about inclusion, then it really wasn't about turning people away unless they did something really outrageous or egregious--egregiously, not agreeable or gracious. That's not right, egregious is the word I'm looking for. There we go. That's when we would have to have a long discussion about, you know, the history of the person, like, if they came to us and they had been in the Republican Party, or if they had backed a candidate that had made racist statements or homophobic statements, then we would really question why this person was wanting to join the Rainbow. But outside of that, we were really into people coming in, and the door was open. Come on in and join us.

SAUL 00:25:53

Yeah. So on that inclusivity and accessibility: what communities did the Rainbow Coalition organize in? What were the demographics of the Washington State Rainbow, and how did the Rainbow approach race, gender and sexuality? And how did you think that impacts the Rainbow's organizing?

HELENA 00:26:20

Well, we organized in all communities of color. We also organized in immigrant communities and labor. Labor was a big part of this, as you know, Cindy [Domingo] is very much involved, and people in Rainbow were also connected with the [Gene Viernes and Silme] Domingo's murders and the fact that they had fought against labor violations and so have you. So labor was always a big part, communities of color, people who had limited

access to politics, whether that was physical accessibilities or if that's where they worked, or their beliefs, gender identification.

The purple stripe became a big stripe in the rainbow. That's before Pride. Pride took on all the colors, right? But the Rainbow did too, and that was started initially, where the Rainbow, you know, the stripes meant something: the brown, the yellow, the red, the black, the white, the purple, all of that meant something. Now I guess they would consider it lavender. Some communities with limited accessibility sometimes use lavender, and that wasn't clearly identified then, but it was anybody and everybody. So we organized in all the communities. And so we took on everybody who felt shut out of the mainstream politics. We took those folks on. I don't want to sound redundant, but it was like every community you can think of that was not white, mainstream, conservative politics, we had held our door open.

The environmental, the green part of the Rainbow, we were very much involved in that. In fact, I became the first representative from the Washington State Rainbow Coalition to the Washington State Environmental Council, and that was my work, was to help bridge the rights activism between the Rainbow Coalition and environmental folks. The other thing that Larry Gossett, myself and a woman by the name of--last name is Wolf. I think I want to say Helen [sic, Hazel] Wolf. I'm not sure that I have it right, and I am sorry that I don't have this name exactly right. But anyway, she had a dream that there would be the environmentalists would work closely with people with the Rainbow to create services for environmental issues that were impacting people of color. And with her help, we created the CCEJ: Community Coalition for Environmental Justice. And that work was for looking at environmental issues that impacted minority communities, such as where power lines are put, that most power lines are put in low income communities, and power lines has a relation to cancer, and how does that impact our communities? Or we had a big conference on the Duwamish River and people who fish out of the Duwamish River or fish out of other waterways as part of their daily diet, and they had limited access to including food in their diet. And how was that healthy? Was it not healthy? What do we need to do around those things? So that was a lot of things that we had to do. [pauses]

Okay, sorry. Got a note from my boss. Anyway, so we did a lot of work around what are the environmental issues impacting communities of color, low income communities, here in Seattle, here across the state. At that time, I think the zoning has changed, we had paint factories that were grandfathered into the Central District, and then that meant that how much air was being exposed to our children from lead in paint. And then the other thing we looked at was the asthma rate for our children in Seattle, and where does that compare to children who are white and have affluence? So, you know, it was a lot of things we worked on.

HELENA 00:32:04

What would you believe to be some of the coalition's achievements? What were its strengths as an organization? And do you think the Rainbow nationally and in Washington state had a long term impact on yourself and on electoral politics? And what were those impacts?

HELENA 00:32:30

Of course, let me be a little more succinct about it. First of all, I still believe in everything that I believed in in 1987. I still vote that way. I still support candidates that way. I look to see if they have Rainbow stripes in them. And I'm not talking about were they affiliated with the Rainbow, but do they have Rainbow beliefs? That's number one.

And I have supported numerous, numerous candidates who now hold or have held elected offices that were Rainbow members, and people put in influential positions. So a lot of work around that area, and it still goes on today. People are running for office, people wanting support, they still utilize the members of the Rainbow as a

way to get support for their own candidacy. Even my own husband, who was very much involved in the Rainbow with me, ran for office. We've had lots of friends who've run for office that we met in the Rainbow, and that's all over the state. So yeah, it's still with me today, and it's still utilized today, and I think that, you know, unfortunately, a lot of young people don't know that, but I think for the folks who were involved in the Rainbow still having a major impact.

Can we pause for a second? I need to respond to something.

SAUL 00:34:14

Yeah.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

SAUL 00:34:18

Okay, and in your opinion, what were some of the Rainbow Coalition's biggest achievements,

HELENA 00:34:26

Our biggest achievements were: one, we influenced state politics, election of officers, supported significant human services strikes, we supported communities that did not have a voice in the political sector. We gave them that voice. You know, when we had our state convention, there was probably about five hundred people there. That is significant, you know, to have that many people. So at our height, we had people from all over the state involved. So I think that the fact that we were able to reach into all kinds of communities throughout the state, a lot of times, when you have a liberal organization, they are just kind of focused in their one little geographical area. But we really worked hard to make sure that we were including everybody around the state.

And the fact that we also worked with environmentalists as well, and said, you know, "We need to stop." At that time, environmentalists were always pitted against people like the Rainbow Coalition. So if you were for human services rights or human rights, then they would take money from the environmentalists to support your work, or they would take money from the human rights issues to support environmental work. And so what we said was we need to stop being pitted against each other, and come together and work together as one single force. And that was a change in how politics was done. So, yes, I think we made a significant impact, besides all the elected people that we put in office who continue to do our work, you know, in a place where you make decisions.

SAUL 00:36:41

What challenges, if any, did the Washington State Rainbow face?

HELENA 00:36:46

[laughs] People had different ideologies, and that was often difficult. And there was a point you'll probably find out in your history discovery where there was actually a split in the Washington State Rainbow Coalition, that there was one leader who said that he thought that he should be the head of the Washington State Coalition, and there was another group that said, "No, he shouldn't be the head." And it didn't make--It made things very difficult, and it was hard. And the information--the split got into newspaper, and so it got negative publicity, because we'd always come across as very united, and then now the press was like, "Well, which Rainbow Coalition do I talk to? You have two of them." And that got back to Jesse Jackson, and Jesse Jackson came out here and said, "Clean that up, because we're not having that." And I think that put a bad taste in a lot of people's mouths. And so it was really hard to have that sense of unity after that. It was difficult. Not that we didn't, I mean, we continued on, but it did set us back.

SAUL 00:38:16

Can you talk a little bit about what those clashing interests were, how that set you guys back, and also just like the year. too, if you remember?

HELENA 00:38:28

I'm thinking it must have been around 1990. Yeah, I'm thinking it was either '89 or '90. And the clash was really about who was going to lead the Rainbow Coalition. And so we have Roberto Maestas, who was the head of El Centro de la Raza, I think they've changed the name of that organization now. And we had Larry Gossett, who was the head of the Central Area Motivation Program. We also very much had Bernie Whitebear, who was the head of United Indian Tribes.

And it seemed to me there was one other person... Oh yeah, Bob Santos. Bob Santos was in the International District, and he had been successful at getting the International District changed from the Chinatown to the International District. And he started--there was a couple of Asian American organizations that Bob started. And I don't know if you're familiar with Bob Santos, he has a book that's called *From Hot Dogs to Hum Bow* [sic, *Hum Bows, Not Hot Dogs! Memoirs of a Savvy Asian American Activist*], which tells his story about the work that he did, and Bob Santos was considered the unofficial mayor of the International District.

So all of those people are gone, except for Larry Gossett. He's the one that's still remaining. And so I certainly hope that you have a chance to interview Larry. But when it came to the Rainbow, I think there was a real division between whether or not it should be Roberto or Larry that leads us, and Roberto and Larry were best friends. So, I think Larry was even maybe best man at--Roberto was maybe Larry's best man, I'm not sure, but that's how close they were. So it was a difficult time, and they remained close friends, it was the organization that had the difference of opinion.

SAUL 00:41:13

What is your understanding of the Washington State Rainbow Coalition's mission? Did it coincide with the mission of the National Rainbow? And the Rainbow Coalition has a strategy of inside and outside, and what does that mean? And what did you think of that strategy?

HELENA 00:41:35

Yes, I think the National Rainbow Coalition was our foundation for our mission. We didn't stray too far afield from that. And yes, we had a strategy of inside and outside, which I don't think anybody objected to, because it was the most effective way. We were looking at any and all strategies to be effective and to be influential. So yeah, that was very important.

Saul, how many more questions do you have?